

NOTES FROM THE CITY NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL'S MAY 19 WORKSHOP ON NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING

[A video of the 2007 event is at <http://www.seattlechannel.org/videos/video.asp?ID=5010730>, or on the CNC/district councils web site at <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoodcouncil>.]

PANEL C DISCUSSION NOTES

Following the panel presentations and using their presentations as a point of departure, approximately 15 persons participated in an hour-long wide ranging discussion of land use topics related to neighborhood plans and policies.

SEPA

General concern over proposals to change thresholds. Felt that purpose of such a change was only to save developers money. Asked that citizens have 3-6 months to review and respond to any proposals to alter thresholds. General lack of attention to cumulative impacts from development of some areas including impacts on water/sewer utilities, traffic. Cumulative impacts can occur on a single site as well - example offered was Crown Hill Safeway gas station.

Comment on potential problem for fire truck access on 4- and 6-unit town home developments.

SEPA appeals process too burdensome because of deference to city decision makers and some thresholds, like measuring traffic impact at screenlines, are not adequate to measure impacts experienced at neighborhood level.

Recommendation to bring SDOT staff out to a disputed area when contesting a development on basis of traffic impacts because decision makers need to actually see the situation to understand mitigation of denial.. Must be proactive and persuade decision makers.

Impact Fees

Problems were identified with current ways development does not actually pay for concurrency. One comment that some developers will voluntarily provide some impact mitigation.

Seattle does not collect open space impact fees per se.

Current impact fees proposals are a problem b/c they only apply downtown.

Problem also with control over spending of funds in impact fees bank - too much executive control over spending locations; nothing gets to neighborhoods.

If Mayor lets go of impact fees, should communities try to find another way to collect development fees for parks and streets? No conclusion on this.

Concern expressed with pending MF zoning changes which will effectively increase both height and density without any mitigation for negative cumulative or site specific effects.

Questions about definitions of affordability of housing and individual expectations about finding affordable housing. Debate over argument that increasing density in some areas (Seattle downtown and neighborhoods) prevents urban sprawl. Where is the evidence that this is happening?

Providing regulatory incentives will not guarantee quality or affordability because developers first respond to the market. Developers build mega homes because of market demand.

If this is not desired, citizen's role is to elect people who will impose desired requirements for production of affordability or density etc.

Should Neighborhood Plans use Rezones?

Lesson learned from Bitter Lake community trying to prevent inappropriate big box development at 125th/Aurora is that "if the [neighborhood] plan is toothless, it's worthless." Suggests that neighborhood plans must have strong land use policies and look at rezoning areas where current code allows undesired uses. The code controls.

Housing Affordability

Debate over best way to achieve goals of affordability... built new or preserve existing. Suggestion to ask the Seattle Office of Housing to find ways to preserve existing housing stock and best way of keeping family housing affordable.

Currently trend is to use tax abatement and other means to subsidize new housing, but no way to provide similar incentive to owners of existing stock to keep rentals affordable.

General consensus that increasing density is not helping affordability as cost of new construction is so high.

No agreement that DADU's are good response to affordability issue. They might work in some places but not popular with exception of few areas in SE Seattle.

Accessory housing should not be allowed in areas without existing infrastructure like sidewalks and drainage.

Debate over current model of using non profit developers to produce new affordable housing. Some argued that the private marketplace can produce housing at less cost per unit when the tax subsidy is added to the development cost of so called "low income housing". Others disagreed. Suggestion that HUD or other federal dollars should be used to underwrite loans for low income home ownership instead. These arguments tied to claims that city is directing excessive amount of subsidized housing into SE Seattle, which is suppressing the creation of new market-rate housing and other economic development in that area. Strong criticism expressed over declaring some areas "blighted" use of eminent domain to favor specific types of development activities.

Impact of Major Institutions

Discussion about affects of major institutions such as schools on quality of life. Example mentioned was Wallingford where school district is asking for piece of adjacent park to enlarge school gym and provide parking garage. Suggestion that this kind of "deal" was prohibited by initiative requiring replacement of parkland taken out of park use with equivalent land in same area. Not clear how this is being interpreted in case of Wallingford playground.

Parks and Open Space

Neighborhood plans should look again at adequacy of open space and parks given amount and types of growth in past decade. Pro Parks created new parks but maintenance now in question since levy will not be renewed.

Growth Projections

Puget Sound Regional Council has adopted a "hybrid metro model" for directing growth, anticipated to be 1.2 million more people in greater Puget Sound area by 2040. Projections add 250,000 to Seattle's population by 2040. This will put big pressure on Seattle neighborhoods. Implication that many neighborhood plans simply did not address these levels of growth and impacts.

Seattle Planning Commission

The Commission holds open meetings (7:30 - 9 am in City Hall) with opportunity for public comment. Relatively few citizens attend but individuals with financial interests in land use policies do attend. Anyone can find Commission meeting agendas and white papers on land use topics on their web site. Important to read because the Commission is making recommendations on incentive zoning, impact fees and code changes which could have widespread effects.

Discussion time ended at 11:40 am.

Notes by Irene Wall, facilitator

PANEL D DISCUSSION NOTES

Following the panel presentations, nine people participated in a discussion of opportunities and conditions for doing a new neighborhood plan where one does not already exist.

History and issues for new neighborhood plans

The 38 current neighborhood plans that were adopted between 1998 and 2000 cover about 60 percent of the City's area, leaving without a neighborhood plan some neighborhoods that might want one. Some of the existing neighborhood plans also, within their boundaries, cover certain neighborhoods only partially, posing the question whether to increase an existing neighborhood plan's treatment of these neighborhoods, or for them to seek their own neighborhood plan.

The July 1994 ordinance that adopted the Comprehensive Plan directed that City assistance be provided for neighborhood plans, to be allocated according to priorities which include consideration of whether residents and businesses want a neighborhood plan. An October 1994 City Council resolution directed that priority be given to urban centers, urban villages, manufacturing and industrial centers, or distressed areas, but did not rule out other areas. In 1996, the City Neighborhood Council urged that "every neighborhood has a right to plan," and recommended a set of policies to make it possible to have a neighborhood plan for every part of the City (to the extent that residents and businesses in each area want to have one).

No new neighborhood plans have been initiated since adoption of the initial 38. But the positive experience of many neighborhood plans has led some neighborhoods that do not currently have one, to seek their own neighborhood plan. Whether or not your neighborhood ought to have a

neighborhood plan is something only you can answer. Some advantages and disadvantages of neighborhood plans as we have known them are discussed below, after a summary of the important grass roots role in developing the current neighborhood plans.

The current grass roots collaboration and partnership

Each of the 38 current neighborhood plans was developed by a broad-based grass roots planning committee, under contract to the City and with the help of City funds. In the current executive branch review of its future approach to new or renewed neighborhoods, it may be that (regrettably) City contracting with grassroots planning committees will be discouraged in the future. While it is possible for City staff to produce a neighborhood plan, there is a stronger possibility of a top-down result that ignores local concerns.

If the neighborhood planning program, per se, assigns the planning responsibilities to City staff rather than a grass roots committee, there still may be the opportunity for a neighborhood functional plan (such as a transportation plan, an urban design plan, or an open space plan) to be conducted by a grassroots planning committee with the help of a Neighborhood Matching Funds or non-City funds. Although such plans in the past were rarely adopted by the City Council and sometimes not even by a City agency, they could still significantly influence executive branch and City Council actions regarding a neighborhood.

As it was conducted in the late 1990s, the grass roots approach to neighborhood planning does not lack City staff involvement and control. The contract with each planning committee had performance standards for planning elements, deadlines, and outreach efforts, and for the provision of public and agency comment opportunities and a good faith effort to respond to them. Each planning committee worked closely with a City neighborhood planning officer, and also was in active liaison with staff in other departments.

As this process worked in 1998-2000, the City Council held neighborhood hearings on each plan and accepted written comments before taking action. The Mayor and City Council acknowledged each neighborhood plan, but what they actually passed were an approval and adoption matrix (adopted by City Council resolution) that included many specific decisions and to carry them out, many assignments to agencies. A City Council resolution also adopted each neighborhood's goals and policies that were made a part of the Comprehensive Plan. Other resolutions and ordinances were passed if relevant to each neighborhood plan.

Advantages/disadvantages of having a neighborhood plan

Volunteer needs. A successful neighborhood plan requires a large commitment of time for meetings, liaison with the City, and outreach to the neighborhood residents, businesses, non-profit organizations, property-owners, and other stakeholders. Needed are not just large numbers of volunteers, but a breadth of volunteers that reflects the community's diversity. The City and the public must be included in early scoping, drafts, and the final plan, and then there is a process of discussion and negotiation with City departments, the Mayor and the City Council on the approval and adoption matrix that includes the specific actions that the City agrees to carry out. Even then the work is just beginning, as implementing the plan requires constant volunteer efforts in dialogue with City officials on what the plan entails.

Community-building and a shared vision. An incalculable benefit of a neighborhood plan are friendships and understanding as a diverse coalition of neighbors discuss, develop, and carry out a shared vision for their community. Community-building articulates common goals, thus motivating and focusing volunteers, businesses, non-profit organizations, and donors on results even if the hoped-for help from government does not always materialize. The momentum also makes possible an on-going process to review and where necessary, expand or rethink the goals of the past.

Funding and other implementation by government. The most tangible potential of a neighborhood plan is to direct City investment to the neighborhood's priorities. The July 1994 ordinance under which the Comprehensive Plan was adopted requires a "firm and clear relationship between the City's budgeting processes and adopted neighborhood plans." In varying degrees across neighborhoods and programs, City departments, mayors, and city councils have spent public funds as directed by neighborhood plans. Many street and sidewalk improvements, parks and park improvements, and other capital projects would not have occurred without a boost from a neighborhood plan; other projects were changed or dropped based on a neighborhood plan. Some City funds give higher priority to, or required to be spent on, projects from neighborhood plans. Beyond City investment, Seattle neighborhood plans have influenced decisions by other levels of government such as the School District, the Port of Seattle, King County, and the Washington State Department of Transportation and other state and federal agencies.

Boundaries, goals and policies, and zoning. The 1994 Comprehensive Plan for the first time designated urban centers and urban villages, leaving it to neighborhood plans to recommend neighborhood-specific goals and policies, boundaries, and the zoning within them. Each neighborhood plan developed goals and policies that, in negotiation with the executive branch and the City Council, were incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan by an ordinance that also finalized the urban village and urban center boundaries. Comparatively few changes in zoning stemmed from the neighborhood plans, although several of the neighborhood plans recommended that the existing mapping of zones in their area not be changed, and that the development regulations not be changed in a way to, in effect, cause up-zoning or a reduction in parking requirements.

Housing targets and concurrency. The 1994 Comprehensive Plan included housing targets for each of the urban centers and urban villages, with the expectation that once a target was reached, a review would occur, leading possibly to funding of infrastructure to catch up with the growth, and either a reduction in City efforts to encourage more housing construction, or an increase in the housing target there. Several of the neighborhoods have long since met the housing targets in their plan, but the City's review process has not engaged; the main result seems to have been amendments to the Comprehensive Plan increasing the housing targets.

Citywide policy changes affecting urban villages and centers. A fundamental purpose of neighborhood planning is to tailor City policies to the needs and conditions in each neighborhood. An unfortunate trend in recent years has been the City ordinance changes that apply equally to all urban villages or all urban centers, without allowing variation among them, and in apparent conflict with the intent of most, if not all, of the neighborhood plans. For example, an ordinance

was adopted in 2006 which reduced the parking and open space that is required in commercial zoned projects, even though several of the neighborhood plans included language barring such changes, and none of the other neighborhood plans called for the changes. Now the Mayor and his Department of Planning and Development have proposed similar changes for multifamily-zoned projects.

The Mayor and DPD have also proposed to raise the threshold for State Environmental Policy Act categorical exemptions higher in urban villages and urban centers than for other parts of the City. The increased exemptions—already probably too high—would allow even large buildings to go without a “white board” announcement or citizen rights to comment and appeal. More projects would be exempted from the current requirement that the developer submit a landmarks nomination—a process that triggers Landmarks Board consideration and notice to neighbors and to landmark advocacy groups. If adopted, this change would make it likely that some of the potential landmarks in urban villages and urban centers—where most of the potential landmarks are actually located-- will receive less review and will be less likely to be protected than those elsewhere in the City.

With its many advantages, neighborhood planning now carries the serious drawback that (at least for those neighborhood planning areas that are classified by City ordinance as urban villages or urban centers) the City has adopted some policies, and may adopt others in the future, that apply in a cookie-cutter fashion and do not respect local needs or citizen rights there. This trend is particularly troubling because it reduces the ability of neighborhood planned areas to ensure that growth occurs in a way that maintains quality of life. Also lost is the sense of community that comes from feeling engaged in City decisions and believing that the City cares as much about the livability of neighborhood planned areas as it does about the rest of the City. Existing urban villages and urban centers should be aware of and express their views on this trend. And communities that are contemplating a new neighborhood plan should clarify with the City whether they would be designated as an urban village and if, so, whether the recent and contemplated citywide policies would affect them too.

Discussion ended at 11:40 a.m.

Notes and commentary by Chris Leman, facilitator, cleman@oo.net (206) 322-5463